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ABSTRACT

This address by the director of the Right to Read program presents a brief history of the effort, a discussion of the major goals, and a description of the means being used to reach these goals. The Right to Read program is an effort to insure that by 1980 no student will leave our schools without the skills of reading and writing. It is founded on four principles: most children are educable; people, especially teachers and other educational personnel, can change; there are multiple causes of reading problems and, hence, there must be multiple approaches and multiple solutions; and enough knowledge about reading is available to solve the reading problems in our country. The delivery system is then described. The first part is providing good, sound information and making it readily accessible and usable. The second part is continuing technical assistance from the Right to Read staff, who give needed help in planning, implementation, and staff development. But the real impact comes from the multiplier effect: the successes of the demonstration schools inspire neighboring schools to develop and implement their own programs, and so on. And finally, part of the Right to Read program's success must be credited to the involvement of the private sector. (TO)

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THE WORLDWIDE RIGHT TO READ

Delivered Before the Fourth World Congress on Reading

Buenos Aires, Argentina

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U.S. Office of Education

August 3, 1972

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The Worldwide Right to Read

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Washington, D.C.

(In Spanish) Senor Mignone, distinguished platform guest, and all of who have chosen to attend this section of the Fourth World Congress on Reading:

I am most grateful for the very warm reception that you have provided and for your interest in the work which we are doing in the United States. I am honored to be in this magnificent capital city of Buenos Aires.

My first inclination was to speak to you totally in Spanish, since it is the language of Argentina. But I was advised that there would be delegates here from all over the world, and that addressing you in English would be as acceptable. Although Spanish is my second language, I knew I would be more at ease speaking in my mother-tongue, and so--if my hosts will excuse me--I will deliver the remainder of my address in English.

(In English) Let me begin my remarks by telling you that it is a very great privilege for me to be here in Buenos Aires and to speak before this group. The International Reading Association is by far

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Before the Fourth World Congress on Reading, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 4:30 P.M., Thursday, August 3, 1972.

the largest and most influential group in the world dedicated to the improvement of reading. I personally do not think there is a more important task in the world today.

The trip here has been good for me. It has given me greater perspective. I have been so busy recently concentrating on the many reading problems we face in the United States that I seemed to have filed away the fact that we, as a nation, have one of the highest literacy levels in the world.

But that fact can be interpreted in two ways. Either it means that we have done a superlative job in the United States, or that worldwide, all of us have not done as much as we should have. I am afraid the latter interpretation rings most true.

As I got off the plane from Washington in New York, I thought to myself, "It is more than 5200 air miles from Washington to Buenos Aires and you've really only completed the first short leg of that trip. You've got a long way to go."

The same is true with our accomplishments to date in reading, I am afraid. We all still have a long, long way to go. In the words of Robert Frost, we have promises to keep -- and miles to go before we sleep.

Now how far should that be, many will ask? My own answer to that question is this: I think we have to start working in earnest toward the goal of total literacy, world-wide literacy, universal literacy, if you will.

This, I will admit, sounds at first like an unthinkable, and unreasonable goal for us to achieve during our lifetimes. Perhaps--because of the social, political and economic state of the world today--it is far-fetched. But it is not an impossible goal!

It is, in fact, much the same goal which the United States set for itself as a nation several years ago.

One would assume a nation as wealthy and prosperous as ours would have no illiteracy. In spite of the excellent educational system in my country, the fact is that the United States is plagued with enormous reading problems.

There are eighteen and one-half million adult Americans who are considered functionally illiterate. They cannot read well enough to properly fill out the kinds of basic forms and applications that every American must be able to complete in order to function in this era of technology.

The United States today is a country where three out of every 10 students in our schools are reading below their expectation level

and below their capabilities.

In big cities, the problem is worse. Up to half the students are reading below grade level.

Right to Read was created as a concerted effort to attempt to solve these problems. Let me begin by giving you some historical background about how the program came into being.

The Right to Read concept was created in September 1969, when the then U.S. Commissioner of Education, announced plans for a nation-wide effort to wipe out illiteracy in the United States. The goal, he said, was to insure that by 1980 no student should leave our schools without the skills of reading and communication. Right to Read has been rhetorically called "Education's Moonshot". It is indeed a noble goal and we are proud to have a part in helping to accomplish it. Only when a nation of people admit and face its weaknesses can it decide to build a stronger one.

Shortly thereafter, our President, Richard Nixon, took up the call. He appointed a prestigious 60-member National Reading Council, which in turn, established the National Reading Center. Within months, the first Right to Read Office was set up in the U.S. Office of Education.

The following year, Commissioner Sidney P. Marland, Jr. decided that to be effective, Right to Read needed to expand greatly its program within his Office of Education. And in July 1971, he asked me to come to Washington from California to head the new program.

I figured that if we were going to come anywhere near meeting the awesome goal which had been set for us, we needed first to lay down some basic philosophical principles about the teaching of reading, and we did. These have become the guiding markers along our road of progress.

The first is a strong conviction that most children are educable--that most children can learn, whether they are rich or poor, black, brown, or white; whether they live in mansions, in the suburbs, or in the ghettos of the major cities, whether their mother tongue is English or Spanish.

Secondly, there is the firm belief that people can change. We believe teachers and other educational personnel--and parents--can and will be eager to adopt new ways of doing things if they are convinced that these new ways will help children to read better.

Third, we believe that since there are multiple causes of reading problems, so must there be multiple approaches and multiple solutions.

Right to Read has been careful not to fall into the trap of promoting any single approach because we know there is no one "magic" way to teach reading.

Finally, we believe strongly that we now have enough knowledge about reading on the shelves of our schools of education to solve the reading problems in our country. What we need is to get that research off the shelves and into the hands of those who can use it--the teachers in the classrooms. Therefore our fourth fundamental belief is that Right to Read should act as a spur for putting that knowledge into practice, and do it in some systematic fashion.

How have we set about doing this?

Our first job was to identify the most promising research and some of the most effective reading programs in the nation. I am sure that all of you in this room have visited or been part of a class where you were certain in your own mind that every student sitting there was learning to read to the best of his ability.

We searched deeply and widely, looking for these kinds of programs and we found them. Lots of them. But then came the hard part. We wanted to find out what makes them effective. With that key, we knew we could duplicate these programs elsewhere.

We were surprised that in many cases, even the marvelous teachers who had designed the programs did not know how they had done it. Some did not know what components went into their successful programs or how they interacted with one another to work as well as they did.

So we would send in a team of experts--each was really a kind of reading detective, I guess--to find out what makes the program work.

In some cases, it was--admittedly--impossible. But in others, our teams of sleuths were successful. And those programs are now being duplicated elsewhere, in other schools and in other parts of the nation.

We have, at present, 244 demonstration projects set up all across the country. All of them were started with the information we had developed in this manner.

Whenever we found a program of reading that was truly successful, we examined it according to specific criteria and found out what elements it contained--what techniques, what supplies, what resources had made it successful.

Our next task was to take this information and put it into some usable form, so that the school districts which had agreed to cooperate with us could duplicate one or more of the successful

reading programs in their own areas.

To do this, we developed reading kits, each of which describes a particular program in a multi-media format. Each kit first tries to give those unacquainted with a new program an overview of what that particular project is about. Then it becomes more detailed. A kit will tell you, for instance, not only that a program has a "language experience" approach to reading, but how it operates. It also tells you how they went about it--how they trained their teachers, how they motivated the youngsters, how they involved the parents, how they utilized paraprofessionals. It also gives data about the children who participated in the tested program, so that you know their performance level, the base line data, and what have you.

For example, we visited a bilingual reading program in East Chicago, which taught reading, utilizing the children's skills in both English and Spanish. It worked and we wanted to find out why.

We went through the program with a team of people, including a classroom teacher, a school administrator, a reading specialist and other persons especially skilled in evaluation. Together, they systematically devised ways of finding out what was going on in the program, what its objectives were, and how successful the program was in meeting those objectives.

Our bilingual kit which was designed using this program as its basis describes the kinds of personnel involved. Did they need a lot of

new personnel, or could the program operate with the regular staff by having them retrained?

It also describes the instructional approaches used in the program. It is very interesting to me that every successful program we have examined has used a variety of approaches to the teaching of reading. But every single approach has embraced the practice of diagnosing the needs of the children involved, then prescribing techniques to meet those individual needs.

The motivation factor is another feature of every kit. We found that most schools, on the first query, were unable to tell us what kinds of motivational techniques were built into their programs. Now we know that motivation is fundamental to any reading program. But those involved really hadn't thought too much about it. So we had to use a variety of methods to try to get that information.

The kit also tells you about each program's adaptability. It shows whether the approach can work with only one type of population or whether it will work for a variety of children who have differing needs.

The final component in each kit, of course, is evaluation. How well did the children do, not just on standardized tests, but in terms of additudinal changes, increased interest in reading, and

other aspects of change which can be measured and are so important?

We have also developed with each kit an instructional sampler, which gives the prospective user a sample of the various types of materials and supplies used in the program, be they for students or teachers. And we include a cassette tape. It contains an interview with the person who was responsible for developing the program. Finally, we include a film strip showing the teachers actually working with the children.

We do not, of course, require the principal or school administrator of any of our demonstration schools to adopt any one of these various approaches or programs which we have packaged like this. But we do require them--and their reading teachers--to examine a variety of these programs--all of which we are sure have worked--and see how they can fit in with what the school is now doing.

Maybe they will find one aspect of one program which they could use to improve what they are doing. On the other hand, maybe they will find several whole programs they will want to try out in their schools. One thing is sure--some teachers will find some programs more comfortable to work with than others. And no program will work unless the individual teacher involved is comfortable using it.

During the last school year, we field tested these programs in selected areas of the country. Now we are revising the kits where

necessary and will soon make them available to the country generally.

So this is the first part of our delivery system--providing good and sound information. We provide information about the most effective practices in reading, information about where effective programs are occurring, information about why certain programs did or did not work very well. And we are doing this on a national basis.

Schools may utilize this information whether they receive funds from Right to Read or not. The materials are self instructive and designed to bring about improvement through examinations and alterations.

The second part of our delivery system is technical assistance. For too long, the U.S. Office of Education gave away Federal funds without really knowing how they were to be used, without providing people with the expertise necessary to help the recipients spend the money wisely. And so we asked that our cooperating school districts accept our technical assistance. We were pleased to learn they do so gladly. We now have a cadre of people on the Right to Read staff whose job is to go around the country to our projects to give the needed help in planning, implementation and staff development. This number will be enlarged soon.

The third way in which we help is, of course, money--financial resources. In the United States today, because of a variety of reasons, most public school districts are facing a financial crisis. Many are having trouble just keeping their present programs intact and we know that if we want them to try something new, something different, then we must give them money as well as information and technical assistance.

The usual way a school district could get Federal funds for any educational purpose was to write a lengthy proposal which supposedly explained what the money would be used for. Having visited various Federal programs throughout California, I knew from my old job there that what was acually going on usually bore little resemblence to what the written proposals said would be going on.

I knew that these voluminous proposals usually told the reader more about the writer's skill than what the program would actually be like. And so I decided we would do away with such proposals in the Right to Read program.

Instead of asking for written proposals, we asked for a school district and the principals involved to commit themselves to a total Plan of Action. They drew up their own Plan of Action, right there at the local level. We don't do it for them in Washington. We do, however, give them the help they need in

drawing up their plan.

We have developed Needs Assessment instruments that relate to reading. And we have developed charts to help a principal systematically look at what is going on at his or her particular school, then utilize this information to evaluate the program presently offered. The assessment materials show principals where the deficiencies lie and what they can do to make their program work better.

The school district must then sign a written commitment to make these changes--and then actually make them--before Right to Read allows them to participate as an experimental district.

When the school district has done as much as it can locally, then we give it some money. The funds are used to draw up a Plan of Action showing what else it plans to do with our help. It is at this point that the district makes a written proposal.

But it is not written by some person in the superintendent's office who has little contact with the field. It is written by the staff of the local school which has worked together to develop the program. We think they are the only ones who can truly know what help they need.

The plan must outline the fundamental objectives of the proposed program with a degree of specificity that will allow us to measure

what they plan to do. We see objectives as road maps telling us where we need to go.

We also look to see whether there are definitive reading approaches described in the proposal. We don't particularly care which one or which group of approaches are included, because we think people are more important than approaches and some people work better with some approaches than others. But we do think the people need to know--in advance--which approaches they plan to use.

We also examine the proposal carefully to see whether the curriculum materials they propose to use are relevant. We look to see whether the parents are intimately involved in the program. We feel they should be utilized, either on policy-making boards, or as teaching aides, or in the adult programs, or in the many other ways parents can be brought into the program.

We also look closely at the staff development component on the job. People will make the difference, not remedial bandaids, and finally, we examine the proposed evaluation techniques--how they plan to find out whether their proposal is succeeding.

At each site, we have asked that the school principal set up a unit task force made up of parents, teachers, librarians, and many others who can help him or her in planning the program. We don't have advisory committees, as such. What we have are working task forces. Their responsibilities include the planning, implementation and monitoring of the program. Our technical assistants help these

task forces. But the basic responsibility is theirs.

It is terribly exciting to get around the country and watch those first demonstration projects working--and working well. It's terribly gratifying to see on-the-job planning as well as on-the job training. We have thought all along that this is the only viable, professional way to go and our demonstration programs are proving we were right.

I have dealt so far only with the first major thrust of Right to Read--the establishment of demonstration projects to test the information and kits we have worked up.

But I am convinced that just funding little projects around the United States will never have the massive impact that it must have if we are to be serious about eliminating illiteracy.

From the very start I have been convinced that there must be a multiplier effect built into these demonstration projects. And one has been.

The eventual goal of all of our demonstration projects is to turn them all into programs which are so good that they can become models for their neighboring school districts. We give each project three years to reach this point.

As the neighboring schools develop their programs, they can soon become models for their neighbors, and so forth. This multiplier effect must keep working until every school in every district in every State in the union has developed new and better methods of teaching reading to all of its students. (Impact Schools)

But all of our literacy problems are not among youngsters in public schools. And what about the adults who cannot read?

If we are to truly eliminate illiteracy in the United States, we know that Right to Read must include more than the professional educators in its strategy. We must involve the private sector and others who are interested in lending a hand. We must involve business and industry and get them to lend their strengths and resources to the problems.

We have already started working in these other areas, also. We are funding more than 75 community-based programs. Many of the children in our schools with reading problems also have parents with reading problems and so we try to cure the problems of both simultaneously.

Some of these are job-related instructional programs, where working men and women have their particular reading instruction tailored to their needs on the job. We have other programs that involve sending tutors into the home to work with parents. We also have training programs for parents on how to help their children with reading, prisons and correctional institutions, business and industry.

And we are also working with the colleges and schools that train our teachers. I am appalled that most of the teachers in the United States are given only a three-unit course in the teaching of reading, while it is mandatory they get six units in physical education and eight in music.

I'm beginning to wonder if we're not asking teachers to do things that we've been unwilling so far to prepare them to do. And I'm beginning to wonder if this isn't one of the basic causes of our reading crisis today.

In addition to increasing the amount of reading training given prospective teachers, we're also asking these teacher-training institutions to become more involved in daily staff development. We think the schools and colleges of education ought to go where the action is--to the local schools--and get involved in on-the job training and retraining programs for teachers.

And so, you can see that in the year we have been in existence, we have been busy. We are, for the first time helping local districts to see that some of their reading methods and techniques work while others do not. More important, we are helping them to find out why the ones which do work are working and translate that "magic" into an easily understood systematic approach which other teachers, schools and districts can utilize. We have built in a multiplier effect.

Another feature of Right to Read is the Office-wide coordination within the Office of Education. All programs having reading and related aspects focus their resources upon the goal of total literacy, thereby creating a major Federal thrust. This concept is also followed through at the 50 States who also coordinate all related programs, regardless of funds on reading improvement.

We have also started attacking the problem of adult illiteracy and have made our first important moves to involve the private sector and business and industry. We are even working now on a system of helping coordinate the nearly one billion dollars spent each year in Federal aid from other programs which involve reading--to make sure each dollar is spent wisely.

As you can see, we have been busy. But we have only reached the "New York leg" of our trip to end illiteracy. We have only just begun. And I frankly do not see how we will reach our declared goal of eliminating illiteracy in the United States by 1980. That is only eight years away, and there is so much to be done. We hope as Robert Frost said "promises to keep and miles to go."

I do not find that fact of life too demoralizing, however. The fact is that we as a nation have finally realized officially that we have a problem. And we have committed talent and money and

other resources to solve that problem. The fact that we will probably not reach our goal on time does not bother me that much. At least we have a goal now, and have devised some practical means of getting from here to there. Four years ago, there was no goal. Four years ago, there was no literacy problem--not officially, anyway.

We finally recognized our problem officially because the evidence was overwhelming that there is a direct correlation between a citizen's literacy level and his ability to earn a decent living. There is a correlation also between functional illiteracy and other social ills. Education is an economic investment, investment in our most precious resources, our children.

In California, where I came from, it costs about $4,000 a year to keep a family with two children on welfare. It costs about $5,000 or more to keep a man in prison for a year. It costs nearly $4,000 to keep a youngster in a juvenile home for the same period. And it costs even more to let a man remain unemployed and give him a government check each month.

A totally literate, productive individual certainly would not have to find himself in those circumstances, whereas an illiterate man or woman or child might have little other choice.

Our nation finally realized--offically--that we must pay for our problems either one way or another, and we decided that eliminating illiteracy would be far cheaper than continuing to support the bitter harvest of social ills that illiteracy has reaped. The United States, as a national policy, has decided that fighting illiteracy is a good investment. It has bet its money on its children, and I think it is going to win. I have talked only about those who cannot read because they lacked the skills. There are millions more who have the skills but lack the interest in reading. They too must be assisted by Right to Read.

I bring up this point because I feel it is terribly relevant to our worldwide conference here today.

We, as the citizens of the Planet Earth, have realized for years that we have a worldwide literacy problem.

We have realized that there is a direct correlation between the literacy level of a country and its gross national product; between the ability of it citizens to read and the health and welfare of those citizens.

We have realized that the social ills caused by illiteracy have had their political repercussions, too. We have seen the nations of this earth, plagued by famine and hunger, turn to war to solve their problems.

We, as the citizens of this world, have--as I said--known for years that we have a worldwide literacy problem. But we have yet to officially declare it. We have yet to officially say we're going to do something about it. We have yet to set a goal for eliminating illiteracy worlwide.

I think it is time that we did just that!

I think it is time that the delegates to this worldwide congress on reading call upon our officers and directors to draft a resolution officially recognizing the problem of world illiteracy and officially resolving to do something about it.

What can we, as an organization, do? Admittedly, not much. But there is an instrument of change already in existence which could set such a goal of world literacy and help reach it. That, of course, is the United Nations. Through UNESCO, the United Nations has already sponsored some reading programs, especially in the developing nations. But its record to date has been as spotty as ours was in the United States before we set our official goal and established a nationwide program.

I would hope that our resolution might call upon the United Nations and others to follow the lead of the United States and officially recognize the problem of world illiteracy. It should also urge the United Nations and others to make an all-out attack on the problem through its worldwide UNESCO resources and set some

time-limit goal for bringing all of this about.

If we at this conference--The world's most concerned citizens about reading--can convince the United Nations to take these steps, we may live to see the day when all of the citizens of the world have the Right to Read.

That should be out goal. That goal, like ours in the United States, may never be fully and completely met.

But no task has ever been completed without a start. And the time for that start is now. It is here. It is at this Fourth World Congress on Reading.

To every man his right, to every man his shining golden opportunity. To every man the right to live,to grow,to become whatever thing his talents and opportunity can combine to make him. This,said Thomas Wolfe is the promise of America.

Again, let me thank you for your courtesy in extending me this invitation.

Thank you and goodbye.